

Defining Aversiveness: A Reply to Van Houten and Salzinger

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Van Houten and Salzinger make the important point that our verbal behavior is controlled by the contingencies operating in the environment and both have taken steps to identify some of the variables controlling inaccurate use of the term "nonaversive" behavior management. Unfortunately, the contingencies that produce imprecise terminological usage are very powerful and it is quite difficult to find contingencies that will compete successfully with these in preserving our scientific terminology.

Van Houten suggests that professional discourse such as this may play a role in maintaining the integrity of our terms. However, it is unlikely that such practices alone will have a large effect on behavior shaped and maintained by such factors as access to special funding opportunities, large consulting fees, publication practices, and recognition by special interest groups.

Salzinger proposes that we may circumvent this problem by finding other terms to replace scientific expressions. He proposes the term "heroic" as an alternative to "aversive." I believe that simply utilizing a new term has few merits. One can easily conceive of trying to explain "heroic" by referring to "aversive" methods. A simpler solution would be to use common everyday language. Ethically and legally we are mandated to obtain informed consent from consumers of our technology. By describing in detail our practices as well as the expected benefits and risks, we would be fulfilling these mandates as well as keeping our scientific terminology free from contamination.

The basic premise of my original paper was that incorrect use of "nonaversive" may have negative implications for both our science and its consumers. There is,

however, one positive consequence resulting from the use of the term "nonaversive" that cannot be ignored. That is that more persons with challenging behaviors have been exposed to, and benefited from, behavior analytic technology than might have otherwise been the case. There has been a recent burgeoning in the number of conferences, seminars, papers, and books making use of the term "nonaversive." Consumers and others may be much more open to the use of techniques which, on their face, do not employ punishment or other aversive techniques. Consequently, consumers and professionals in other disciplines who have misconceptions about conventional behavior analysis may be more willing to attend training, read publications, and use techniques that are referred to as "nonaversive." This is not trivial.

What then can be done? It seems that there are several options available. We can dispense with the term "nonaversive" altogether when speaking to non-scientific audiences. As outlined in my original paper, few behavior change techniques are truly nonaversive and, in order to be forthright about our practices and to be conceptionally consistent with scientific terminology, common everyday language could suffice. We could also educate those unfamiliar with our technical terms by stressing functionality. Clearly, this would be a long and arduous process, a fact to which those of use who have taught behaviorally-naïve audiences can attest. Further, we could strive to disabuse the lay populace of the belief that behavior analysts in general do not stress the use of aversive procedures.

I believe that we must address at least all three of the above options. We should not employ technical terms with the lay

populace unless we are willing to make the effort to teach these persons the "correct" use of them. In many cases, this is unnecessary. As Salzinger pointed out, many persons do not care about our technical terms; they simply want to change the behavior of their charges. For these persons, nontechnical language would be

the best solution. We must, however, actively educate those persons with misconceptions about our science in its realities. If these persons have an accurate notion of our practices we will not need to resort to popularizing behavior analysis by compromising our scientific verbal behavior.